

*Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023*

**Commencement Address at Howard University**

*May 13, 2023*

Well, thank you, Mr. President, for that introduction. Dr. Morse, thank you for the incredible honorary degree. And thank you, President Frederick, for the invitation and for your leadership of your alma mater.

Serena—student body president, College of Pharmacy, class speaker. And just remember, when you're President of the United States and they say, "Joe Biden is out in the waiting room to say hello," promise me you will not say, "Joe who?" All right? *[Laughter]* You all think I'm kidding. *[Laughter]*

To the distinguished faculty and staff, thank you for having me. And to the parents and families and the class of '23—2023, congratulations. And by the way, we will get to giving you your degrees. *[Laughter]* I promise that's coming.

You are here with the heart and through the heartache, through blood, sweat, and tears of everything that's came before, for everything yet to come. And you are here at a new moment of hope and possibilities.

But, graduates, before we begin, as mentioned many times, tomorrow is Mother's Day. Stand for your mothers and grandmothers. Stand and thank them. Where I come from, moms rule.

To my friend—and he is my friend—Congressman Jim Clyburn, the thing that I admire most about you, Jim, is your absolute integrity in everything you do—in everything you do. This is a man of honor. I attended South Carolina State University's commencement as Jim received his degree he earned 60 years ago, but never got a chance to receive it in person. Jim, it's an honor to join you here today and receive an honorary degree from this great university.

And it's truly special—special—to join fellow honorees. Prime Minister Rowley of—*[laughter]*—Prime Minister—Prime Minister, I didn't know you were so talented. *[Laughter]* I just thought you were foreign policies—you know, Latin American guy. *[Laughter]* I—you know, I—we've got to talk. *[Laughter]* All kidding aside, thank you for being a strong partner in the Caribbean and for addressing climate change and supporting democracies across the Western Hemisphere.

I'm also honored that—there's a person here today, Dr. Tony Allen. He is president of my home State BCU [HBCU; White House correction], Delaware State University, where I got politically started. I was fortunate to have Tony as a Senate staffer for a long time. Then he got his Ph.D., had a distinguished career in business, and became president of an HBCU. Now Tony chairs my White House Board of Advisers on HBCUs, which is designed to support and advance HBCU excellence with a lot more money.

I'm also proud to say that we're the first White House to formally convene where the real power is: the Divine Nine. *[Applause]* Oh, you all—you all think I'm kidding? Not a joke. The Divine Nine not only has a seat at the table, we definitely hear you at the table. And they're, first time ever, at the White House permanently.

So, folks, in 2023, I'm truly honored to be here at Howard. Chartered 156 years ago by an act of Congress just after Emancipation and the Civil War. Founded on a hilltop in Washington, DC. The Mecca. The Mecca.

Always promoting, excellence, leadership, and truth and service. It really has. And a proving ground for future leaders of science, medicine, education, business, faith, arts, entertainment, and public service. Trailblazing intellectuals, lawyers, doctors. The first Black—I might say—Vice President of the United States of America. You can say that again.

Kamala sends her love. And she sent a clear message that today I have the privilege, she points out, of speaking at the real H-U. Now you realize that's going to cost me at home.  
[Laughter]

This—there's enormous pride in this university founded in the verses of the Howard anthem. And I quote, "Reared against the eastern sky, proudly there on hilltop high. . . . There she stands for truth and right, sending forth her rays of light." It matters. It matters. It matters.

We're living through one of the most consequential moments in our history with fundamental questions at stake for our Nation. Who are we? What do we stand for? What do we believe? Who will we be? You're going to help answer those questions.

Let me take you back to January of 2009. I stood in Wilmington, Delaware, on the train station of Amtrak, carrying my folder waiting to be picked up by a guy named Barack Obama. The first Black man elected President of the United States.

I was there to join him as Vice President on the way to the historic Inauguration in Washington. A moment of extraordinary hope, but also, as I stood there—and this is the God's truth—I couldn't help think about another day I stood there.

It wasn't much more than your age. I'd just got out of law school. I was a public—I had gone to work for a big firm, but my State—because of when Dr. King was assassinated, parts of it were—my city—parts were burned to the ground. We had a very conservative Governor. He stationed the National Guard on every corner with drawn bayonets for 10 months. I quit and became a public defender.

And I used to have to introduce my clients—[applause]—no, that's not so noble—I had to interview my clients down at the Wilmington train station when they were arrested. On the east side, that's where they'd be taken in the aftermath of the riots that burned Wilmington following his assassination.

In 2009, while waiting for Barack, I was both living history at the same time I was reliving it. A vivid demonstration: When it comes to race in America, hope doesn't travel alone. It's shadowed by fear, by violence, and by hate. But after the election and the reelection of the first Black American President, I had hoped that the fear of violence and hate was significantly losing ground.

After being—no longer being Vice President, I became a professor at the University of Pennsylvania for 4 years. But in 2017, in Charlottesville, Virginia, crazed neo-Nazis with angry faces came out of the fields with—literally with torches, carrying Nazi banners from the woods and the fields chanting the same anti-Semitic bile heard across Europe in the thirties. Something that I never thought I would ever see in America.

Accompanied by Klansmen and White supremacists, emerging from dark rooms and remote fields and the anonymity of the internet, confronting decent Americans of all backgrounds standing in their way, into the bright light of day. And a young woman objecting to their presence was killed. And what did you hear? That famous quote. When asked about what happened, that famous quote. "There are very fine people on both sides."

That's when I knew—and I'm not joking—that's when I knew I had to stay engaged and get back into public life. No, I—[applause]. I don't say it for that reason. I say it for the journey. I

don't have to tell you that fearless progress towards justice often meets ferocious pushback from the oldest and most sinister of forces. That's because hate never goes away.

I thought, when I graduated, we could defeat hate. But it never goes away. It only hides under the rocks. And when it's given oxygen, it comes out from under that rock. And that's why we know this truth as well: Silence is complicity. It cannot remain silent. We have to live through this battle for the soul of the Nation. And it is still a battle for the soul of the Nation.

What is the soul of a nation? Well, I believe the soul is the breath, the life, the essence of who we are. The soul makes us, "us."

The soul of America is what makes us unique among all nations. We're the only country founded on an idea—not geography, not religion, not ethnicity, but an idea. The sacred proposition rooted in scripture and enshrined in the Declaration of Independence that we're all created equal in the image of God and deserve to be treated equally throughout our lives. While we've never fully lived up to that promise, we never before fully walked away from it.

We know that American history has not always been a fairytale. From the start, it's been a constant push and pull for more than 240 years between the best of us, the American ideal that we're all created equal—and the worst of us, the harsh reality that racism has long torn us apart. It's a battle that's never really over.

But, on the best days, enough of us have the guts and the hearts to stand up for the best in us; to choose love over hate, unity over disunion, progress over retreat; to stand up against the poison of White supremacy, as I did in my inaugural address—to single it out as the most dangerous terrorist threat to our homeland is White supremacy. And I'm not saying this because I'm at a Black HBCU. [*Laughter*] I say it wherever I go.

To stand up for truth over lies, lies told for power and profit. To confront the ongoing assault to subvert our elections and suppress our right to vote. That assault came just as you cast your first ballots in '20 and '22. Record turnouts. You delivered historic progress.

I made it clear that America—Americans of all backgrounds have an obligation to call out political violence that has been unleashed and emboldened. As was mentioned already, bomb threats to this very university and HBCUs across the country.

To put democracy on the ballot. To reject political extremism and reject political violence. Protect fundamental rights and freedoms for women to choose and for transgender children to be free. For affordable health care and housing. For the right to raise your family and retire with dignity.

To stand with leaders of your generation who give voice to the people, demanding action on gun violence only to be expelled from State legislative bodies. To stand against books being banned and Black history being erased. I'm serious. Think about it. To stand up for the best in us.

And today I come here to Howard to continue the work to redeem the soul of this Nation, because it's here where I see the future. And I'm not—that's not hyperbole. We can finally resolve those ongoing questions about who we are as a nation. That puts strength of our diversity at the center of American life. A future that celebrates and learns from history. A future for all Americans. A future I see you leading. And I'm not, again, exaggerating. You are going to be leading it.

Again, let's be clear: There are those who don't see you and don't want this future. There are those who demonize and pit people against one another. And there are those who do anything and everything, no matter how desperate or immoral, to hold onto power. And that's never going to be an easy battle. But I know this: The oldest, most sinister forces may believe they'll determine

America's future, but they are wrong. We will determine America's future. You will determine America's future. And that's not hyperbole.

No graduating class gets to choose the world into which they graduate. Every class enters the history of a nation up to the point it has been written by others. But few classes, once in every several generations, enters at a point in our history where it actually has a chance to change the trajectory of the country. You face that inflection point today, and I know you will meet the moment. I—just think about the many ways you already have.

With your voices and votes, I was able to fill my commitment to put the first Black woman on the Supreme Court of the United States of America. And by the way, she's brighter than the rest. *[Laughter]* She is one bright woman. Because of you, more Black women have been appointed to the Federal appellate courts under—than under every other President in American history combined.

And, by the way, I mean it. I mean it. Because of you. Because of you. You turned out. You spoke up. You knew. You showed up, and the votes counted. And you made people say: "Whoa, wait a minute. What price will I pay if I don't do the following?"

You feel the promise and the peril of climate change. Because of you, we're making the biggest investment ever in the history of the world in climate change. Don't ever think your voice doesn't matter.

I'm keeping my promise that no one should be in jail merely because of using or possessing marijuana. Their records should be expunged—just expunged.

My student debt relief plan would help tens of millions of people, especially those on Pell grants. Seventy percent of Black college students receive Pell grants. Many of you, the savings would be significant and even wiping out student debt completely for some.

But this new Republican Party is dead set against it, suing my administration to stop you from getting student debt relief. The same opposition who received relief loans, I might add, to keep their businesses afloat during the pandemic—Members of the Congress—worth thousands, even millions of dollars, most of which didn't have to be paid back. Yet they say it's okay for them, but not for you. I found it outrageous—find it outrageous.

To reduce your student debt service payments when you graduate, we're also ensuring that no one—no one—with an undergraduate loan today or in the future will have to pay more than 5 percent of their discretionary income to repay their loans, down from 10. And in 20 years, it's gone. Republican officials are fighting that as well. But I'll always keep fighting for you. And many others will—and many in the Republican Party as well will fight for you.

But we also know there is more to do. Because of your power, we took the most significant law on gun violence—we passed it—the most significant law in 30 years. But we will not give up. I got the Assault Weapons Ban passed 30 years ago, and we're going to pass it again. We must pass it. And there's more to do on police reform and public safety.

During the State of the Union, I asked the rest of the country to imagine having to talk to their children and their families like your families had to talk to you. It's about your security. It's about your dignity. It's demeaning and degrading and deadly when you just have to stand there and say, "When you're stopped, turn the interior light on, put both hands on the wheel, don't reach for your license." What in the hell is going on in America?

No, think about it. I ask all the parents of nonminority children to ask what they would say, what they would do. I know you're frustrated that there are so many elected officials who refuse to pass a law that will do something.

Kamala and I stood next to the family of George Floyd and civil rights leaders and law enforcement officials to sign the Executive order I came up with requiring the key elements of the George Floyd bill be applied to Federal law enforcement: banning chokeholds, restricting no-knock warrants, establishing a database for police misconduct, advancing effective and accountable community policing that builds public trust. And we'll keep fighting to pass the reforms nationwide.

Equal justice is a covenant we have with each other. It must not just be an ideal; it has to be a reality. You're leading the way on this and so much more. That's why Kamala and I are so committed to investing in you and HBCUs. HBCUs help produce 40 percent of Black engineers, 50 percent of Black lawyers, 70 percent of Black doctors and dentists, 80 percent of Black judges.

Look, we see HBCU excellence in every day, with staff at every level of the White House and the administration, because I decided when I was elected, I promised I was going to have my administration would look like America.

But we all know that HBCUs don't have the same endowments and funding as other major colleges and universities. For example, denying the opportunity to build and fund research labs that will lead to new technologies and good-paying jobs.

That's why I asked and we've invested \$6 billion and counting in HBCUs, including to create new research and development labs that prepare students for jobs of the future in high-income fields, from cybersecurity, engineering, biochemistry, health care.

Standing here, I think the last time I came to Howard with President Frederick and others was in my final year as Vice President to host the Cancer Moonshot on campus, because you are leading the way. You're the scientists, the doctors, the advocates who will bring—do big things like ending cancer as we know it and even curing some cancers, which we're on our way of doing.

You're the diplomats and global citizens making democracy work for people around the world. Lawyers defending our rights. Artists shaping our culture. *[Applause]* Fearless journalists. This is real though. You're—this is what you're doing. Fearless journals—journalists and intellectuals pursuing the truth and challenging convention.

You're the leaders of tomorrow, but it's coming on you really quickly. Because of you, I see a future we can finally move away from the narrowed and cramped view that the promise of America is a zero-sum game: "If you succeed, I fail." "If you get ahead, I fall behind." And maybe worst of all, "If I can't hold you down, I can't lift myself up." Instead of what it should be, "If you do well, we all do well." That's what I see in you. That's what I see in America—and more Americans are—a future of possibilities for all Americans.

Look, no matter—that future—what it holds, my sincere hope is that each of you find a sweet spot between happiness, success, and ambition. That—a good life. A life of purpose. Because here's the thing: You don't know where or what fate will bring you or when. You just have to keep going. You have to just keep the faith. You have to just get up.

And you can find the balance between ambition and happiness and success—that good life of purpose, of family, and, as you know here at Howard, of excellence, leadership, and truth and service. There is no quit in you. There is no quit in America.

So let me close with this. In our lives and in the life of the Nation, we know that fear can shadow hope. But it's also true that hope can defeat fear.

In January of 2021, I stood at the U.S. Capitol to be inaugurated as President of the United States. Just days before, on that very spot, a violent insurrection took place, a dagger at the throat

of democracy. For the first time in our history, an attempt to stop the peaceful transfer of power in this country. And they failed. Our democracy held. Again, hope prevailed.

And this time, I was standing with a Black woman about to take a 2-mile procession down Pennsylvania Avenue as President and Vice President of the United States of America. And who was marching alongside her? The Howard University marching band in lockstep and solidarity. You were.

I give you my word as a Biden, class of 2023, you're the reason I'm so optimistic about the future. And I give you my word, I really mean it. You're part of the most gifted, tolerant, talented, best educated generation in American history. That's a fact.

And it's your generation, more than anyone else's, who will answer the questions for America: Who are we? What do we stand for? What do you believe? What do we believe? What do we want to be?

I'm not saying you have to share this burden all on your own. The task at hand ahead is the work of all of us. But what I am saying is: You represent the best of us. And that's the God's truth. You represent the best of us. Your generation will not be ignored, will not be shunned, will not be silenced. So on the hilltop high, keep standing for truth and right, and send your rays of light.

Congratulations to you all. We need you.

God bless you, and may God protect our troops.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:34 a.m. in the Capital One Arena. In his remarks, he referred to Laurence C. Morse, chairman, Howard University Board of Trustees; Prime Minister Keith Christopher Rowley of Trinidad and Tobago; Tennessee State Reps. Justin Jones and Justin J. Pearson, who were subjected to expulsion votes in the Tennessee statehouse on April 6 for peacefully protesting in support of stronger gun safety laws following the recent shooting at Covenant School in Nashville, TN, then later reinstated by municipal bodies in their home districts; and Supreme Court Associate Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson.

*Categories:* Addresses and Remarks : Howard University, commencement address.

*Locations:* Washington, DC.

*Names:* Allen, Tony; Clyburn, James E.; Frederick, Wayne A.I.; Harris, Kamala D.; Jackson, Ketanji Brown; Jones, Justin; Medor, Serena; Morse, Laurence C.; Obama, Barack; Pearson, Justin J.; Rowley, Keith Christopher.

*Subjects:* 2021 civil unrest and violence at U.S. Capitol; Anti-Semitism; Cancer research, prevention, and treatment; Caribbean Nations, relations with U.S.; Civil rights movement; Climate change; Community policing programs, improvement efforts; District of Columbia, Howard University; Diversity, equity, and inclusion, improvement efforts; Domestic terrorism and extremist violence, efforts to combat; Federal student loans, partial forgiveness; Gun violence, prevention efforts; Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs); Law enforcement, use-of-force policy improvement; Marijuana, decriminalization efforts; Mother's Day; Pell grants; Policing best practices, improvement efforts; Racial equality, improvement efforts; Research and development; Supreme Court Associate Justice; Trinidad and Tobago, Prime Minister; Vice President; Virginia, 2017 civil unrest and violence in Charlottesville; Voting rights, protection efforts.

*DCPD Number:* DCPD202300416.